

*After a
killer
earthquake
in Alaska, a
Strategic
Air
Command
photo
interpreter's
initiative
sent . . .*

Recon to the Rescue

by Dino A. Brugioni

On Good Friday, March 27, 1964, the most powerful earthquake ever to hit North America rocked Alaska. Homes disintegrated, buildings shattered, streets buckled, bridges collapsed, power and telephone lines fell, and hundreds of gas and water mains were ripped apart.

Soon after the quake hit at 5:36 p.m., tidal waves smashed port facilities, oil storage tanks, and salmon canneries along the state's southern coast. Stronger than San Francisco's 1906 earthquake (8.4 versus 8.25 on the Richter scale), the quake left 114 people dead or missing, most of them from the Anchorage area.

President Johnson declared Alaska a disaster area the next day. But Washington still knew little about the extent of damage.

That same morning at Offutt AFB, Neb., Lt. Col. Eugene F. Tighe, chief of photo interpretation for the 544th Aerial Reconnaissance Technical Wing, recommended that Strategic Air Command reconnaissance aircraft be used to photograph the stricken area. SAC headquarters agreed. Within hours an RB-58 *Hustler* from Carswell AFB, Texas, an RB-47 *Strato-*

jet from Forbes AFB, Kan., and a U-2 from Laughlin AFB, Texas, were crisscrossing the ravaged Alaskan landscape. Launched from their home bases and refueled in flight, the aircraft landed at Offutt with the exposed film. Colonel Tighe and his photo interpretation crew worked through Saturday night and Easter Sunday making enlargements of stricken areas and compiling a damage assessment report.

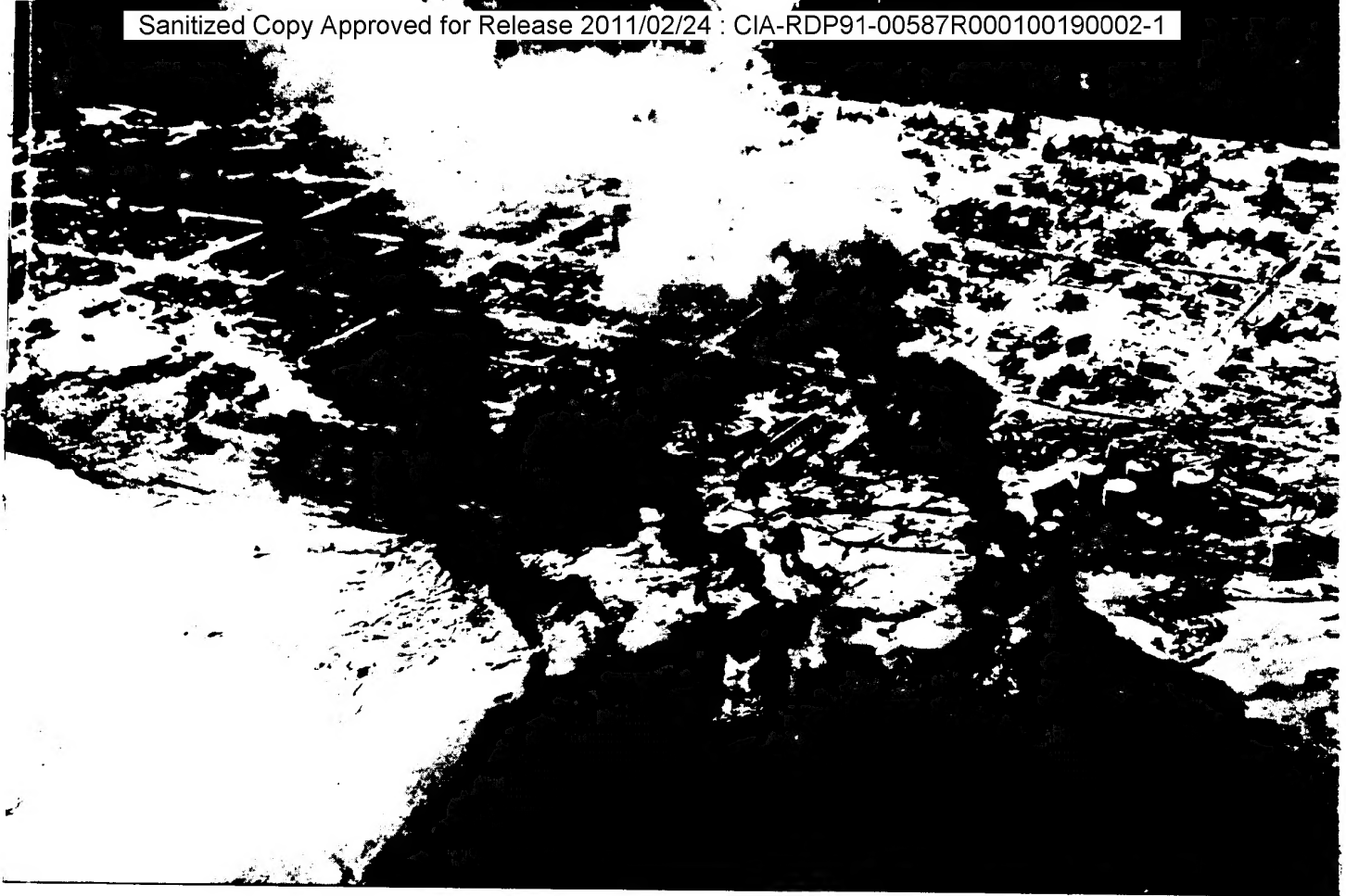
With the SAC commander off-station, Lt. Gen. Hunter Harris, vice commander, reviewed the dramatic photos. He directed Colonel Tighe to fly to Washington that day and show them to Chief of Staff Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, who then showed them to Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara.

On Monday morning, Colonel Tighe briefed a meeting of the Office of Emergency Planning. Until then, the only pictures of the devastation available to planners were those from hand-held cameras. During his briefing, there were audible sighs and expressions of awe as planners marveled at the volume of information available from the aerial photos. This was the first encounter with advanced reconnaissance systems for most of them.

At Seward, railroad cars with wheels shorn off by the water's impact were hurled and scattered from their tracks.



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Even as Colonel Tighe briefed, General LeMay was making arrangements to update President Johnson, who was spending the Easter weekend at his Texas ranch. Maj. Robert McAllister, Colonel Tighe's deputy, headed for the Texas White House with a second set of photos.

Ushered into the president's office, McAllister unfolded the evidence of death and destruction in Alaska. According to McAllister, the President was moved. "Oh, my God, those poor people," President Johnson said. "This is terrible. What are we doing about this situation?" After listening intently to the 45-minute briefing, the president turned to an aide and said, "We are going to do something for those people, and we are going to do it today."

President Johnson then asked Major McAllister how the photos were obtained, who flew the missions, and where the photos were interpreted. As the major prepared to depart, the president took his hand, saying, "I want to tell you how proud I am of you and your organization for taking time out over the holidays to do this important work for me. I want you to personally express my appreciation to the pilots and interpreters for this magnificent effort."

Another photo interpreter flew to Alaska to brief the governor and Lt. Gen. Raymond J. Reeves, commander in chief for Alaska. Upon

seeing the photos, General Reeves said, "You have more information in those photos than I have received from my normal reporting methods."

On Wednesday, April 1, the president announced he would ask Congress for \$50 million in new emergency funds for Alaska. To ensure cooperation of the 11 government agencies involved in relief efforts, he established the Federal Reconstruction and Development Planning Commission for Alaska. By combining the agencies' capabilities into one organization reporting directly to the president, actions that would normally have taken days to accomplish were done in hours.

Just five days before, Colonel Tighe had volunteered his unit's reconnaissance and interpretation expertise to help gauge the destruction from one of America's worst natural disasters. That initiative mobilized a nation's government.

Now the reconstruction of Alaska was under way.

(Editor's note: Mr. Brugioni is a former senior official and a reconnaissance and photo interpretation expert from the Central Intelligence Agency. Colonel Tighe later became a lieutenant general and the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency.)

Waves of 35 feet traveling at more than 100 mph destroyed Seward's port facilities and nearby houses. Sparks from severed power lines ignited ruptured fuel tanks.